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Community Through Commonality: Growth Beyond the Academic While In College

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Community Through Commonality:
Growth Beyond the Academic While In College

Artist Statement

During the process of creating my honors project I hoped to convey an appreciation for people and their experiences. I wanted the participants to learn more about themselves as they shared their personal insights with me and eventually with future viewers. My intent was to create an overwhelming and inspiring experience that mimicked my own since attending UA and to build on the sense of commonality I've noticed in those who have attend college. My project is multifaceted, but each piece is necessary to the other components. It consists of an essay, interviews, and three large scale size portraits.

For my honors project I decided to draw on the knowledge I've gained from attending The University of Akron. Before I became a student, I thought I had to know exactly what I wanted to study and stick to whatever path I chose. As a result of being an incredibly indecisive person, this prospect terrified me.

People often wear a perplexed expression when they learn that I am a graphic design major, minoring in psychology, and emerging technologies. I've also been Editor-in-chief of The Butchelite for the last two semesters. The question "What can you do with that?", frequently follows. I sought to answer that question with this project.

My college experience hasn't been what I expected but it has been very positive. I've grown in a variety of areas and have also had the privilege of watching some of my classmates grow in similar ways.

This narrative essay explores my growth in character, mind-set and depth of knowledge. I suspected that my experience was similar to others that have attended college so I conducted interviews with friends, family and classmates. I sought to answer if my experiences of growth were unique or if it was common for college to affect people long term in ways other than academically.

My first step was to narrow down who I would interview. I decided on four unique individuals, all of whom attended college. Kayla Weinman, Killian Reed, Jonathan Ketchens, and Paige Ketchens. I asked each person the same set of questions and also answered those questions in my own self interview.

Along with addressing personal and academic areas of growth, the questions also pertained to confidence, decision making, interest in new experiences, personal

accountability, independence and better communication skills - as these are areas that I have noticed as improved in myself.

Overall, the interviews shared an open dialogue format with the common questions acting as anchor points for each interview. By making my interviews more informal, I tried to create a reflective and thoughtful atmosphere. This narrative is highly introspective and my goal was to show the same amount of depth in the interviews.

Those that review with my research will hopefully relate to it or be exposed to viewpoints they are not familiar with. The people I interviewed ranged in age, gender, major and career so there are a varied sample of experiences. I intend for my research project to have the ability to create a sense of community through commonality and shared experiences.

To measure this I've drawn parallels from how they were before college versus during and after. Are they more confident and/or decisive? Have they stepped outside of their comfort zones and tried new things? Are they more accountable? Have they become more independent and have they learned how to better communicate with people?

Kayla Weinman and I met at a local cafe for her interview. She graduated from UA in the spring of 2021. We chatted about what the upcoming semester would hold for the both of us. She was preparing for graduate school while I was gearing up for my senior year.

Looking back on the beginning of her college career, Kayla expected to find out what it was she wanted to do. She knew she wanted to work in the art field but hadn't quite narrowed it down before she enrolled.

“I thought I was going to be a teacher and then I thought I was gonna be a graphic designer because that’s where the money is,” she said laughingly. “I hated the experience. It made me feel mediocre. When I first got to Myers I tried to find my place and make a few friends.”

As I sat with her I could not imagine anyone with her level of talent feeling mediocre. It made me wonder:

How would you describe yourself then?

Kayla described herself as quiet and mad at the world. She noted that at the time she didn’t have good friends. When I asked her to describe herself as she is today, her face lit up. She stated that she was happy and nervously excited for the future. Her career path isn’t exactly clear but she was confident she would figure it out.

Kayla saw herself as dependent on others and was wary of making her own choices. She admitted that she was nervous to be moving to a new state but wouldn’t let that fear slow her down. “If you’re comfortable you’re not growing. When you’re uncomfortable there’s room for growth. Being uncomfortable and being anxious is a good feeling to chase and not run away from.”

Do you think you would have grown in the same ways without this experience?

Emphatically Kayla said, “*No. absolutely not.*” According to her had she not gone to college she would still be in her home town.

“I’d probably have a few kids right now. I’d probably be married to the jerk face I was with and I would just be like everyone else. I would probably have a dog. Which a dog would be cool but other than that everything else would just be bleh.”

Looking back, did college meet your expectations?

College exceeded her expectations. She never expected that she would feel confident enough to pursue her ambition of being an artist. *“It was kind of a pipe dream. Like I guess that would be cool someday but I never would have suspected that I’d actually go for it. My wildest dream was to be an art high school teacher. There’s nothing wrong with that but now I can do so much more if I want to. I just have to try my best. And if it doesn’t work out I have a fall back plan. I just didn’t know my options. I didn’t know what was out there. My ceramics professor really showed us our options. He explained residencies to us and that grad school was an option. Like I didn’t know artist had grad school to go to. I didn’t know residencies were a thing, I didn’t know there were communities with-in communities. Like I had no idea any of this existed but now I do know it exists and I do know it’s a possibility to do stuff. I didn’t even know you could get your stuff in museums. I thought you had to be dead for that to happen. I just thought artists had shows.”*

What’s the most valuable thing you learned that was academically based?

“With ceramics always make sure your stuff dries, it’s gonna take longer than you think it will. Slow drying and firing is very important and also just cuz its ceramic doesn’t mean you have to go the traditional route. Non traditional is an option.”

Right after saying this Kayla abruptly threw up her hands and said, *“No this: Sketching is the most important thing ever. You think you don’t have to sketch? Always sketch, sketch, sketch again, sketch some more sketch for a fifth time, and then do your base. Plan out every little thing, It might not work but you’ll be so much better off.*

My stuff not sketching versus my stuff when I did, day and night. Sketching is the most important thing ever. Put that on my gravestone. I swear, sketching.”

What was the most valuable thing you learned that wasn't?

“I guess trying not to let people use me for things. I noticed people were really friendly with me but once I graduated college people don't talk to me anymore but this because I'm not the assistant to the wood shop or ceramics studio and I'm not working in the gallery anymore. So I didn't realize I had all these ins with people so they were more comfortable asking me for things. Hey you wanna go. Out for drinks later but then ask me for something. So just watch out for people using you in really light ways, I thought people that were my friends...were not friends, I was just something for them to use. To get something out of.”

Killian Reed's interview took place later in the summer. The weather was windy but sunny which allowed us to sit outside and enjoy the breeze. Later on in the year Killian ultimately decided to stop attending college.

He thought college life would be similar to how Hollywood movies tend to present it. Killian expected parties and drinking but ultimately he was trying to create connections with people.

How would you describe yourself then?

"Definitely shy but not shy about doing new things. So I tried things but I wasn't always comfortable communicating.”

How would you describe yourself now?

“Very tired of college,” he stated this with pure exasperation. “It feels a little excessive plus changing majors a couple of times has drawn it all out. And because of covid it reduced going out and made joining clubs and meeting people more difficult. Which destroyed a big part of my college experience.”

In what ways have you grown?

After a bit of contemplation he answered with, *“I’ve become a bit more independent, that’s mostly it.”*

Do you think you would have grown in the same ways without this experience?

“Probably. I mean I gotta get out into the world at some point. College was one of those things that you were told you do after high school but also if I didn’t go to college it would have been graduate and find a job, move out.”

Looking back, did college meet your expectations?

For Killian this question could be answered in two ways, *“Yes and no. Made friends, joined clubs. Drinking and going out is part of the college experience but I thought there would be more guided lessons and a lot more information dumping. A lot of it is self guided and I wasn’t expecting that and I don’t enjoy it.”*

What’s the most valuable thing you learned that was academically based?

“Always ask questions. The whos, whats, wheres, whens, whys and hows.”

What was the most valuable thing you learned that wasn’t?

“Put yourself out there. If you want to go do something do it. There's not really anything out there stopping you. Just other peoples fears of what could happen.”

The final two people were interviewed together. The dynamic between my cousin Jonathan and his wife Paige Ketchens is lighthearted and playful. They've been married for over ten years and normally their house is teeming with the activity of three rambunctious and growing boys.

Often times one will interrupt the other to hilarious effect but during the interview when one of the two spoke the other gave them their undivided attention. If one spoke of themselves in a self deprecating manner the other would interject in their defense. This, however, did not stop them from joking with each other. They would finish each others sentences and offer more detail to the many situations they've shared.

Their experiences at college appear to have brought them better understandings of themselves and each other. The interview took place in their home. Their youngest son was there enjoying having free run of the house while his two older brothers were away for a few hours.

What did you expect from college in your first year?

"I expected to ace that shit and get all good grades." Paige said this with supreme confidence drawing a chuckle from both Jonathan and I. *"I thought that it was kind of like high school. So you had to have classes start at 8am and you got done by two. I had no idea that I could set my class up start at noon if I wanted to and I learned rather quickly that the 8am stuff was not for me. But I expected to ace all of it. And I did. I did."*

After rolling his eyes at Paige, Jonathan expressed a different viewpoint. *"Okay, so mine wasn't as illustrious. I expected to be taught,"* he stated with frustration. *"I did not think I had to teach myself. It took me a second to actually figure out that I wasn't*

actually being taught anything. I mean when you listen to lectures and stuff like that in the science classes, you are taught but applying it was hard. Each teacher has a different way that they want you to learn. And yeah, I had a bunch of them that weren't anything like my high school teachers. They weren't like any kind of teacher that I had built with."

How would you describe yourself then?

Jonathan answered immediately with, "Gamer." As Paige shook her head at him he continued, "Okay, 2K almost derailed my life. I had to stop but I was ranked number three online in the world. So, if I was good at one thing it was that!"

"No patience," Paige said. "I had zero tolerance for things. I was quick to respond and react to any and all bull malarkey. Zero. If you were doing something that I thought was stupid, I was gonna say 'That's stupid and you should stop.' If you didn't like the way I said it, I didn't care. I think before I speak now. If I was the same person I was as a freshman... 17 year old Paige gave zero fucks. I had no responsibilities. I didn't have to stop and think like I do now."

How would you describe yourself now? In what ways have you grown?

For Paige, she sees herself as more responsible. "I've always thought further ahead. I've always been a planner. But I feel like I don't have that same impulse reaction. I stop and think. I think if someone makes me mad, I don't say the first thing that comes to my mind. Because of all the possible consequences or reactions that can happen afterwards."

Jonathan has one major concern that effected his overall growth after college. *“Oh, yeah, well, my biggest fear once I graduated, was being broke,”* after a brief pause he finished with a laugh *“and we were broke. We were so broke.”*

Jonathan went on to explain how learning about money management and bills taught him how to be a successful and stable adult. That original fear and the resulting experience is something that ultimately still drives him today.

“I think now you're more responsible though,” Paige added. *“I mean, you have three kids. When you add children into the mix it changes things. Priorities switch.”*

Do you think you would have grown in the same ways without this experience?

For Jonathan It wasn't *going* to college that lead to his growth but being away at college. *“Not having mom right down the road or whoever right down the road. Like no, we had to go to school and be up there. I couldn't just be like “Hey, I ain't feeling this man, we need to go.”*

Paige partially agreed with her husband but also felt as though her social circle and experiences sparked something. *“I think the people that I met along the way, also help you know add into the person that I've grown into or am continuously growing into. Some people got left by the wayside on the way to this Paige. You know, some people stuck around but I think a lot of that also has something to do with it. I just think for me being away, I've always been independent. That's something that I've always had but learning how to depend on him (Jonathan), allowing him to be an anchor is something that I learned while we were away. And then allowing, other people to be support systems. So like you build your family, you don't always have to have the family you're born into but when you go away you spread your wings. You know, you find*

other people who become family. That's why I don't think it would have had the same level of growth.

"I think I'm proximity was a big thing, though," Jonathan added, "because I know someone that left for college but they also came back and still kind of relied on their support system a lot. In general, just going away makes a difference. I think it's a microcosm. A combination of things but I know that if I would have stayed home I would not have grown the same. If it wasn't my mama, grandma would have helped or whoever. There would always have been a crutch there and I know that when we were up there on hard times in Toledo we tried everything to figure it out before having to ask for anybody else's help."

Looking back, did college meet your expectations?

"No, they did not meet my expectations. I learned how to learn," Jonathan started but Paige quickly interrupted him.

"Is that what you went to college for? To learn how to learn?" She was incredulous as she asked him this.

"I did learn how to learn but no, that was not my goal," he thought for a moment before he continued. "I had one professor who broke things down in a way that I still do to this day. You had to understand each little component and they all easily fit together. I didn't think becoming a nurse or doctor was too difficult. I thought it was hard but I thought if you wanted to do it, and you just didn't get queasy about random stuff or whatever, and you were smart enough you could. I'm smart. I'm not dumb by any stretch. But sometimes those classes made me feel dumb because of teachers. It wasn't what I was expecting. I thought they wanted you to become something, a contributing member of

society but they just want your money. Yeah, to find the right professors, and that is a complete grab bag of, oh, I need to sign up for this class but if you got a professor that is just, you know, churning them out giving apps, you know, having 200 questions, sixty multiple choice questions where the answers are all similar, like that's not really saying, 'Hey, I'm trying to show somebody how to make themselves better.'"

"It did not," Paige answered. "I just knew when I graduated college, I was gonna have a big paying job. I didn't realize what college actually is. In my mind, it was you go to school you're there for years, you go to graduate school, you're there for you know, three to four years. You get out and get a good paying job, because 'you go to college and you get a good paying job.' That's how you make it, that's what we were taught, those were my expectations. I had no idea that you could be a five year senior because I wasted my whole first year in pre law. It wasn't even a major, that was \$15,000 just wasted. Like, I feel like they should give me a refund. NO, it didn't meet my expectations. I'm not making \$100,000 a year and I'm not somebody's rich housewife. That's not what they sold me at Schumacher Academy. Elementary, middle school, high school, college equals money. That's the fantasy they gave us. They lied. They were a bunch of liars.

Neither could think of something they learned that was academically based.

What was the most valuable thing you learned that wasn't?

Jonathan began his answer with a common phrase. *"Sometimes it's not about what you know. Sometimes it's who you know. But I really don't know anybody. I had one professor, this is not really academic, because she was an accounting teacher but stocks for GM and all these stocks were really low and she was like, 'Look, this isn't like*

any part of our class right now or anything like that. And I can't advise you guys to do this but these companies here are being affected by the stock market. If you have any money, put it into some stocks right now.' I heard her but I didn't really know what that was. It was one of those things where 'You don't know what you don't know.' Other people may tell their kids about stocks and all that type of stuff, or whatever it was, but that was like the first time I'd ever heard of it. It was just like one of those seeds. And then you know, years later I get it. Looking back I wonder, what would have happened if I had put the refund check into some stock. You know, it's kind of partially academic but not really. So yeah, that was one that was important because the seed was always in there but I never acted, and then was watered."

For Paige the most valuable thing she learned related to an important person in her life. *"I think I've gained a better appreciation for my mom's struggle. I didn't really understand the whole 'I just got paid but I don't have any money.' I didn't understand some of the things that my mom probably went through until I was on my own. I think that appreciation grew from my experiences. I didn't understand why my mom did what she did but now I see."*

As for myself I expected to leave college with a degree. I wasn't expecting anything other than that. I expected to better my circumstances and be more equipped to get a good paying job. I didn't expect to make connections or grow in the ways that I have but did college meet my initial expectations? No, it did not.

I expected to remain the same. I'd just have a fancy degree attached to my name. It exceeded my expectations in large part to the people I've met along the way. Of the

people I chose to interview, each one taught me something that contributed to my growth as an individual during my time at UA. But they are just a small sampling of the friends, family and mentors who have done so.

To me Kayla embodies “go big or go home”. There is a lot of risk in creating at a large scale. Something could go wrong and depending on where you are in the project, it could result in an unfinished product. Her success rides on her projects turning out well the first time. There’s no safety net. It either works or it doesn’t. During her time at Myers her involvement was energizing to me.

Her work became readily and easily recognizable in the halls at Myers and her fearlessness inspired me to finally take my work to a larger scale. Through her I learned the importance of sketching and moquettes.

“Sketching is the most important thing ever. Put that on my gravestone.”

If “why not?” was a person it would be Killian. He’s an abstract and experimental artist who’s decisive and one of the most encouraging people I’ve met at Myers but a conversation with him could push you into an existential crisis if you aren’t careful. He questions everything and urges others to do the same.

Quixotism, one of my favorite words, is defined as **“impracticality in pursuit of ideals**, especially those ideals manifested by rash, lofty and romantic ideas or extravagantly chivalrous action. It also serves to describe an idealism without regard to practicality.” (Merriam-Webster 2021)

I enjoy exercises in creativity and conceptually my ideas tend to be bold, unusual, and sometimes startling in scale. I would try my best to tamp down my quixotic

tendencies and be practical. As a result my art wasn't reflective of me, it was just stuff I made. Through Killian I learned how to better embrace my artistic side and discard my fear of what other people's opinions *might* be. Instead of thinking "but that's ridiculous, I can't do that." I say, "Eh, why not," and just go for it.

"Put yourself out there. If you want to go do something do it. There's not really anything out there stopping you just other peoples fears of what could happen."

Jonathan, like my father, has always approached my dreams and goals with a certain level of confidence. At times I refer to him as Mini-dad because he reminds me of my father not just in his behavior but in our relationship as well. Where others have doubted, questioned, or cautioned against them he has always assumed that I would do exactly what I set out to.

He's an incredibly encouraging and approachable person. There's no shortage on people giving their opinions on what he should do in various situations but he is always true to himself and makes the best choice for those he loves. He encourages me to do what *I* feel is best. Evaluate what others say but "ultimately the decision is yours," he'd say. Through him I've learned how to better trust myself and assess my own thoughts, beliefs and desires.

"The seed was always in there but I never acted, and then was watered."

Paige has been a close and dear friend to me for over ten years. Without her support I would not have made it to the level of growth I'm at now this early. She encouraged me to go to college and when I began to overthink it and doubt my

academic abilities she helped me narrow down an area of interest and signed me up herself!

Over the years I have seen her evolve into an inspiringly strong and accomplished woman. She taught me how important it is to marry the varied aspects of my interests and helped me realize that I can have a career that allows me to embrace all of my studies and create my own applications for it. Her urging also helped me open up to the people I've met.

“When you go away you spread your wings. You find other people who become family.”

While I was working on the construction of the portraits I realized they reflected me. The sizing, layering and final decision to color-block were all design choices that reflected my aesthetic. I intentionally kept each interviewee in mind when deciding on the color pallet for their portraits. The backgrounds reflected the tone of the interviews while the colors used to depict them were exaggerations of them physically.

Kayla's rose color background was chosen to reflect her welcoming presence. During her interview Kayla was playful, energetic, and engaging. Her growth during her experiences made her more comfortable with the person she's becoming.

I chose the deep teal of Killian's background to reflect his relaxed nature during his interview. Teal is a combination of blue and green both of which represent calmness and renewal. He was confident about his plans for the future and the new direction his life was taking.

The bright amber background used for the double portrait of Jon and Paige reflected their warm and radiant energy. Together their vibrance is unmistakable and during their interview they were happy, confident and bold.

Being decisive does not come easily to me. There always seems to be a better option or a different way to accomplish nearly anything. "*Left or right? What about straight?*" I would frequently find myself frozen with indecision when confronted with everyday decisions.

Academically the most important thing I learned was how to earn A's and maintain a high GPA. I've been able to maintain a low amount of debt because of it.

The most important thing I learned that wasn't academically based is that it's not as important as I once thought. I'm still an overachiever, that becomes clear when one looks at the scope of this project, but it's not the end all. College isn't only about getting the highest grades, earning praise, accolades and scholarships. I had tunnel vision and was a bit of a know-it-all at the start of this. I *had* to do things a specific way, the *right* way. As I near the end of my college career I realize there is plenty I don't know and instead of letting that overwhelm me, I revel in it. I haven't the faintest idea of what I'm going to learn next, what people I'm going to meet or experiences I'll have. Of the many lessons I'll take with me, the most important one has to be this: I am talented and capable but I'm not super woman. I don't have all of the answers and it's better that I don't.

Before college I liked to think of myself as a mentally independent and self contained person. Basically, a wall flower. My intention was to get in and get out, preferably within four years. My path was set and I refused to stray from it. I had no

intention of joining any clubs or becoming part of the campus community. However, being in an environment where freedom of expression was not only allowed but actually requested led me to the path I'm still traversing now.

Physically being in an atmosphere isn't as important as where you are mentally. You have to be ready and open for growth. Different atmospheres spark different areas of development. Your personal circumstances, your location, even the people you meet, all of these things can ignite and inspire personal evolution but you have to be ready. College *has* been impactful on more than my academic life but that isn't the result of its physicality.

Being in college hasn't changed me, nor the people I interviewed, but it has allowed us to learn more about ourselves. That knowledge would have taken me years to manage without it.

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